

***THORNE
SMITH***

TOPPER

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Topper

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DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER I

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No Change

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FOR some minutes now Scollops had been gazing searchingly at Mr. Topper. And Mr. Topper was troubled. Not definitely troubled, but vaguely so, which to some persons is the most troublesome form of trouble. Mr. Topper was one of such persons. In fact he was highly representative of the type. So free from trouble had Topper's days been that gradually he had come to regard with suspicion all creatures not likewise unencumbered. An earthquake, an eruption or tidal wave would mildly move Cosmo Topper, arouse him to the extent of a dollar donation which would later be deducted from his income tax; whereas a newspaper story dealing with bankruptcy, crimes of violence or moral looseness would cause him speedily to avert his eyes to less disturbing topics. Mr. Topper could excuse nature and the Republican Party, but not man. He was an institutional sort of animal, but not morbid. Not apparently. So completely and successfully had he inhibited himself that he veritably believed he was the freest person in the world. But Mr. Topper could not be troubled. His mental process ran safely, smoothly, and on the dot along well signaled tracks; and his physical activities, such as they were, obeyed without question an inelastic schedule of suburban domesticity. He resented being troubled. At least

he thought he did. That was Mr. Topper's trouble, but at present he failed to realize it.

He experienced now something of the same resentment that came to him upon being delayed in the tunnel on his way home from the city. Things were going on round him in the tunnel, dreadful things, perhaps, but he did not know what they were. He sat in a blaze of light in the midst of clanking darkness. Surrounded by familiar things he felt stuffy and uncomfortable. Even his newspaper lost its wonted stability. Yes, it was a decidedly objectionable feeling that Mr. Topper had to-night as he gave himself to the solicitous embrace of his arm chair and followed with a dull gaze the rug's interminable border design—a Doric motif, clean-cut and geometrically accurate. Once this design had appealed to his abiding sense of order. To-night he hardly saw it, although without his knowledge it was wearying his eyes, and had been doing so for several months.

In Scollops' eyes there was an expression difficult to fathom. Mr. Topper held the opinion that the expression was uncomfortably insinuating, making him in some sly way an accessory before the fact. But hang it all, what was the meaning of Scollops' look? The cat had been fed. He had seen to that himself as he had seen to it ever since he had adventurously brought her home from Wilson's, the grocer's, one evening four years ago. Four years. As long as that in this house; and once it had seemed so new. Now it was an old house, an uninteresting house. Perhaps he was old, too, and equally uninteresting. Mr. Topper felt that he

was, and for the first time in his life permitted himself to wonder about such things.

His intellectual debauch was rudely shattered by Scollops. The cat yawned and tentatively thrust her nails into her benefactor's thigh. It was rather a plump thigh. Long years of well-regulated commuting had despoiled it of its youthful charm. It was a tight thigh and a fleshy one, yet it still reacted to pain. To such an extent, in fact, that Mr. Topper's sensation of trouble instantly gave way to one of mild reproach as he dropped Scollops softly thudding to the floor.

This faint discord in the domestic tranquillity caused Mrs. Cosmo Topper to look up from her needlework. Mr. Topper, glancing across the table, met his wife's eyes. It was just for a moment, then he looked quickly away, but why, he did not know.

"She yawned," he remarked by way of explanation. "Yawned and scratched."

"I know it," apologized Mrs. Topper, mistaking his words for a direct accusation. "I've been doing it all evening. It must have been the veal."

Topper watched his wife remove her sewing-glasses and place them in their case. With an absorbed gaze he followed her movements as she folded her sewing and wrapped it in a piece of linen, which she then deposited in a basket. At this point his expression became almost desperate, then hopeless. No, there was going to be no change in the nightly routine—glasses, case, linen, basket. If she would only reverse the procedure, or for once forget her glasses, that would be something. Meantime Mrs. Topper, unconscious of

tragedy, rose from her chair, came round to where her husband was sitting, and brushed his forehead with her lips. Then, referring once more in a pained voice to the haunting qualities of veal, she left the room.

Mr. Topper listened to her firm step upon the stairs. A certain squeaking of boards apprised him of the fact that she had achieved the landing. For a moment he thought idly about veal in relation to his wife. Then he did an unusual thing. Instead of knocking out his pipe and locking in the cat whose vagrant nature had caused him some rather trying experiences in the past, he gently retrieved that animal from the floor and fell to studying an old atlas which he had plucked from an obscure shelf.

“It made me sleepless, too,” murmured Mrs. Topper an hour later as her husband settled down beside her.

And that night Mr. Topper dreamed of eating curried veal in Calcutta. He was surrounded by many maidens all of whom partook amply of veal, and none of whom complained. It was delicious. He gorged himself.

CHAPTER II

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Scollops Looks Inscrutable

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NOT until the following afternoon, which was Saturday and therefore free, was Mr. Topper able to localize his trouble. The discovery came to him as a shock which gathered intensity as the days passed. It marked an epoch in his life. Even Mrs. Topper, who steadfastly refused to recognize changes taking place around her, detected something new and therefore annoying in her husband. But she reassured herself by believing that all stomachs have their off seasons, and became almost pallidly cheerful when she considered the fact that her stomach's off season was always on—it prevailed the year around. To Mrs. Topper it was an endless source of comfort to be able to trace all mystifying cases of conduct, even her own, to such a tangible and well-established institution as a stomach.

It was Scollops again.... Scollops draped on her master's knee with a Saturday afternoon mist swimming in her eyes.... Scollops, the inexplicable, narrowing infinity between two orange-colored slits.

This it was that gave Mr. Topper the shock. For the first time in their four years of companionable association Topper realized that the cat saw nothing, that is, nothing immediate. Although her yellow, searching gaze included

him, it passed far beyond him down distant vistas from which he was excluded. Caressing and condoning on their way, Scollops' eyes seemed to be roving through the ages, dwelling on appalling mysteries with the reminiscent indulgence of a satiated goddess.

Looking into Scollops' eyes, Mr. Topper discovered that there were things he did not know, colors of life beyond his comprehension, impulses alien to his reason. With his wife's eyes it was different. He knew their every shade and meaning. Nothing in them lay unrevealed. He was familiar with the direct gaze denoting finance, the confidential gaze denoting scandal, the patient gaze denoting servants, the motherly gaze denoting superiority and the martyred gaze denoting dyspepsia.

Suddenly Mr. Topper realized what was troubling him. It was eyes. Old familiar eyes. He felt that he knew them all. He knew the eyes at the office, from the president's to the elevator boy's. It was surprising, he thought, how desperately well he knew eyes. Mr. Topper saw eyes. Mr. Topper understood them. And he had an uncomfortable feeling that they understood him.

Now, however, he was alive to the fact that Scollops' eyes escaped all classification. This both pleased and shocked him. He realized that in spite of four years of close companionship he had not the slightest idea of Scollops' private opinion of him, or of anything else, for that matter. To what was going on behind her eyes Topper had no clue.

Mr. Topper found himself thinking that it would be a relief to have someone look at him in the manner of Scollops. Preferably a woman. Not that Mr. Topper was loose, or

romantic, or both. He had never loitered to pluck forbidden flowers beside the marital path, but had mechanically kept to his schedule with Mrs. Topper at one end and the office at the other.

Once in his youth he had nerved himself to lurch in reckless pursuit of a shop girl in a skating rink, but the meeting with her had been so sudden and demolishing that when he arose from the dust of the floor he departed with a far sharper pain in his spine than in his heart. After that he confined his amorous pursuits to the nice girls of his own set. He never called on them alone, but always with a jolly company of youths, which gave him a sense of security. Later he had met Mrs. Topper, who had already achieved individuality through smoldering dyspepsia, and he had decorously followed her through a summer of neat suburban Sundays, after which he had made the arrangement permanent in the presence of an orderly gathering of neat suburban property owners. And that ended that side of Mr. Topper.

Now, however, he was getting along. Nearly forty and acquiring flesh. Ten years married. He neither had to stretch to reach the electric light nor stoop to walk under the bulb. His face was unremarkable save for his eyes, which were extremely blue and youthful, as if the fire in them had been banked for the sake of conservation. His features would have been delicate had his appetite not been so good or his habits less sedentary. Had their union been blessed with issue, one of the children, probably Cosmo, Junior, would have been a sandy blond like his father, for Mr. Topper's hair

was of an indifferent shade. But there were no little Toppers. Scollops was undisturbed.

He rose, stretched and walked to the window. Scollops merely stretched and resumed her repose, with the austere resignation characteristic of cats when bent on slumber or theft.

"Guess I'll go for a walk," said Topper. "I'm in need of a bit of a change."

"There'll be a roast for dinner," replied Mrs. Topper. "Lamb," she added as he left the room. "You like lamb."

Mr. Topper winced as he collected his hat and stick. Why should he be thus openly reminded that he liked lamb? Couldn't a person creep up on a roast and surprise it some time? As a matter of fact he was not particularly lustful for lamb, or at least he would strive hereafter to dissemble his emotions.

But all he said was "Good!" The exclamation point stuck in his throat.

CHAPTER III

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Mr. Topper Pursues the Sun

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THE street down which Mr. Topper strolled was a nice street. No one needed to feel ashamed of it. No one did. And the people who lived on this street had nice homes; nice, neat homes with well-groomed lawns, well-shingled roofs and well-stocked larders. The style of architecture showed a sincere desire to impress the eye favorably. The effort had been based more on hope than on inspiration. The houses could have been—and frequently were—termed “homey,” “quaint,” and “comfortable,” but after these terms had been exhausted little remained to be said save, perhaps, “sweet.”

Mr. Topper and his neighbors were quietly proud of this street, and had borne their assessments as a tolerant father bears the extras of an extravagant son at college. One could bring one’s friends from the city to this street and let it speak for itself, which one seldom did. Sewerage, real estate and the cost of building were subjects far too fascinating to be left to the imagination. So the visitors from the city heard all about these things, and were not amused.

Being on a slightly higher elevation than the rest of the town, the street was happily called “Glendale Road.” It is rather terrifying to think that the real estate promoter responsible for this name is perhaps still unhung and busily

engaged in giving equally stultifying names to other nice little streets in other nice little towns situated in other nice little localities throughout the United States.

"You know that swamp?" he is, perhaps, saying to his wife at this very moment as he lights his cigar.

"Which one, my dear?" she asks. "You've bought so many swamps."

"And sold 'em, too," he replies with a boyish chuckle. "But the one we drove by last week. I pointed it out to you. It was where they found the body of——"

"Oh, yes," his wife exclaims, "the rag-picker's wife! They had to vacate their shack, didn't they?"

"Well, that doesn't matter," replies her husband rather quickly. "I've decided to run a drive through it. What do you think would be a good name?"

Deep silence for several minutes. Her husband watches her anxiously. She reads a lot of books. Good things, books.

"Mayblossom Drive," she murmurs at last, with a dreamy look in her eyes. "That would be charming. Let's call it that."

Business of writing name down on back of soiled envelope. Husband departs for development in car and another street has come into being.

Nevertheless Glendale Road was really a nice street. It was wide and well paved. There were trees on it at orderly intervals. And, now that June was here, there were leaves on the branches of the trees and there were birds among the leaves.

For some reason Mr. Topper's mind was not occupied to-day with thoughts of sewers, real estate or building costs. Community pride was absent from his mood. He heard the

birds chirping and listened to them intently. How many of them there must be and what a great to-do they were making. Little birds were always so excited. He had held a sparrow in his hand once and felt its heart beat. Somehow it had made him feel like crying. The little thing had been so excited, so bent on living. Life to the little sparrow had seemed so necessary and important. Topper had released it immediately. How busily it had flown away. Well, these chaps up in the tree were having a good time just the same. They never needed a change. They could come and go as they pleased. A nest here and a nest there. A family hatched and a family fledged. Fresh branches in new lands. Adventurous flights in pursuit of the sun. Not a bad life, that. Be a bird and see the world.

Topper smiled and stopped in front of a public garage. He was now on a side street of the town proper, but Mr. Topper was not altogether sure as to how he had gotten there. He had been flying in pursuit of the sun, and on the following day, after church, two ladies protested to Mrs. Topper that he had looked right through them. What had they done to be so dreadfully treated, and what had come over her husband, who was always so polite to the ladies?

"Sparrows," said Mr. Topper at this point, and walked away, leaving his wife to explain as best she could the meaning of his remark.

Seeing Mr. Topper smiling at him, the owner of the garage rested from his labors and called out an enthusiastic greeting.

"Isn't she a pip?" he asked, pointing to the machine on which he had been working.

Impressed by the man's earnestness, Mr. Topper approached the car and surveyed it with the vague gaze of an amateur.

"A regular pip," he said, looking hopefully at the man. "A regular pip of a car, Mark."

Mark beamed.

"It's the coyest little car in the town," he declared, "and it's carried more than gasoline in its time, though it is only this year's model."

"Bootlegging?" asked Mr. Topper, deciding, now that he came to consider it, the car did have rather vicious lines. Too much nickel and a trifle too low to the ground.

"No, victims," said Mark. "There was a bottle in every flap when they found it."

"Then did the car manage to get lost?" Mr. Topper asked with growing interest.

"Wrecked," replied Mark briefly. "Head on to a tree. I've practically rebuilt it, but the motor's good as new."

"It's had rather a sad life for such a young car," remarked Topper. "Whose is it?"

"Mine," replied Mark with pride. "But it did belong to George and Marion Kerby. You remember. Both killed three months back. The estate owed me money so I took the bus in settlement."

Mr. Topper now looked at the automobile with unfeigned interest. Surely he remembered George and Marion Kerby, the fastest young couple in town. At least, they had been. People had always predicted that they would come to some such end. Kerby had never worked. No commuting for him. Rich young devil. And he and his wife had been laid to rest

to the tune of "I told you so." Kerby's wife, a slim girl, good looking, quick in her actions, a mocking sort of a creature. Then, like brushing against a cobweb on a dark woodland path, Mr. Topper's thoughts were suddenly arrested by little clinging threads of memory. Marion Kerby's eyes? Ah, yes, he remembered them. The Kerbys had not belonged to his set, the solid, substantial, commuting set, but had gathered round them, from all parts of the country, a group of irresponsible spirits, who would suddenly appear in a swarm of motors, riot around the town and countryside for a few days, and then as suddenly disappear in a cloud of dust and a chorus of brazen horns. No one had really known the Kerbys, that is, no respectable, accredited member of the community. But Topper had seen them often enough as they darted through the streets of the town, and once he had met Marion Kerby at the dedication of the new twenty-thousand-dollar fire-house.

"Comic operas cost more and are less amusing," she had remarked, with a smile, then asked in a serious voice: "Do all white duck trousers have to look so self-conscious?"

Mr. Topper, being a charter member of the organization, had loyally donned his outfit and joined the ranks of his fellow fire-fighters. Now, at the question, he looked down at his ducks and blushed. Marion Kerby mingled with the crowd, but she left behind her the seeds of rebellion in Mr. Topper's mind. He had never felt in sympathy with white duck trousers, and now he actually hated them. They did look self-conscious, but it showed poor community spirit on Marion Kerby's part to ridicule the uniform. What would a fire company do without white duck trousers? Evidently she

was one of those modern young women who had no respect for tradition. Furthermore, nice women did not talk about trousers on such a slight acquaintance.

A few days after this he had encountered Marion Kerby on the morning train. She had nodded to him and smiled, and somehow her smile had seemed to convey the impression that they shared between them an unholy secret of a most delicious nature. Marion Kerby's smile had caused Mr. Topper to feel much less married. He had puzzled all the way in that morning about her eyes. He had found himself unable to place them. They were never quite the same. Thoughts danced behind them like fountains in the sun, hiding their liquid depth in a burst of dazzling spray.

And now as Mr. Topper stood in the glittering presence of the car in which Marion Kerby and her husband had met their death, he remembered her eyes and felt dismayed that their light had been snuffed from the world. A June heaviness settled down on Mr. Topper and he became conscious of his stomach. It was too large. Indecent. Yes, he was certainly in need of a change.

Mark's monologue swam in on his ears.

"They were a wild pair, Mr. Topper," the man was saying, "but nice people at that. The nicest couple I ever knew. One minute they'd be fighting with each other like a pair of wildcats and the next they'd be guying along like two tramps. Why, the way they went on would make you think of a couple of kids. They were always arguing about who was the best driver and often they'd ask me to decide. There'd be tears in their eyes, they were so in earnest. You'd have thought it was a matter of life and death with them."

"That's about how it was, Mark," said Mr. Topper thoughtfully. "A matter of life and death. A gay life and a quick death."

"What's the odds," replied Mark, with a shrug. "They liked it that way and they got what they wanted."

"I've a feeling they got just a trifle more than they wanted," said Mr. Topper. "They didn't look like a pair that were extremely anxious to die. They were too crammed with life."

"But that's the way it goes," continued Mark, waxing philosophic. "There are lots of people in town I'd rather have seen get in trouble with a tree."

This remark made Mr. Topper feel a little uneasy. He realized that he had never enriched Mark's coffers with the purchase of gasoline or automobile parts. To Mark he was perfectly useless, a fit subject for a tree.

"They had good stuff," Mark went on reminiscently, "and they were generous with it, too. I always had a drink whenever they came in the place. We used to have regular little parties in my office over there."

Mr. Topper walked deliberately to Mark's small office and peered through the door. In his mind's eye he could see Marion Kerby seated at the desk. He had a remarkably vivid picture of her. It was almost as if he had been present at the parties himself. There she sat, her slim ankles crossed, her mad eyes dancing beneath the brim of a smart little hat, and her lips parted in a sarcastic smile. In one hand was a glass which she was holding on high and in the other a cigarette. "Truly an unedifying sight," thought Mr. Topper, and yet he was fascinated by it. He dwelt on the delicate

lines of her face, the small impertinent chin and the fine lips curved in a roving, debonair smile. Then he returned to her eyes and became lost in contemplation.

"They were mad," he mused to himself. "They could laugh the devil down."

Fearing that that was what they were probably doing at the very moment, Mr. Topper turned away from the door and looked at Mark, who was in the act of hanging a "For Sale" sign over the radiator cap of the automobile. The deed done, Mark stepped back and surveyed his handiwork ecstatically, head on one side and hands on his hips. "Here," thought Mr. Topper, "is a master craftsman, one who loves his work for its own sake."

"So you're going to sell it," he said, walking over to the bewitched garage man.

"Sure thing," replied Mark. "And cheap too. Couldn't get anyone to believe she's sound. But she is, every nut and bolt in her. The Kerbys themselves wouldn't know the difference except that she's quieter now. They always kept the old bus rattling."

"Well, they rattled their toy once too often," remarked Mr. Topper, looking moodily out at the street. "I hope the next owner will have better luck."

"Lightning never strikes ..."

"Twice in the same place," interrupted Mr. Topper. "I know, Mark, but an automobile can, and if it isn't the same place it's some place equally unyielding."

With a nod to Mark and a lingering look at the automobile, Mr. Topper left the garage and walked slowly down the street to the main thoroughfare of the town,

where he stopped and looked with unseeing eyes into a butcher's window. Behind him a steady trail of automobiles passed by. He was dimly aware of their swift, hissing tires whirling evenly over the smooth road. They were all going somewhere, he thought to himself, without troubling to look around, all out for a good time—a change. Some of them were going to new places, no doubt, places miles and miles away, maybe as far off as the coast. People did such things, camping at night by the roadside or putting up at inns.

Presently he became aware of the fact that he was looking a leg of lamb full in the face. There the thing was, hardly a foot from his nose. Back at home its mate was probably sputtering in the oven by this time. And Mrs. Topper was twittering about preparing new fields for dyspepsia while the cook struggled to swallow her spleen. It was appalling. Mr. Topper considered the lamb with smoldering eyes, but the lamb held its ground, and for a moment they confronted each other like two antagonists. Then Mr. Topper, at last outfaced by his less sensitive opponent, whirled about and walked back to the garage, this time with purpose in his step. But as he approached the garage he became troubled in his mind, and this trouble made him shuffle slightly in his gait. He had no doubt as to the ultimate outcome of his visit, but how to get it over with was what dismayed him, forcing him to drift about uneasily in front of the garage like a criminal released from the gates of durance. The sight of the “For Sale” sign on the glittering object of his quest stimulated him to action. He lifted his head and walked casually up to the car. Mark, emerging

from the shadows like a proud but jealous god, greeted Mr. Topper with a slight show of surprise.

"How does the thing start?" asked Topper, without any preliminaries.

"How?" repeated Mark dumbly.

"The automobile," said Topper. "How do you start the damn thing?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mark, now sparkingly alive to the situation. "Why, it starts like any other automobile. Put your foot on it and off she goes."

"Interesting if true," thought Mr. Topper. Nevertheless he regarded the starter with a contemplative eye.

"Is it hard to learn how to work them?" he continued. "I mean for a person like myself?"

"Why, Mr. Topper," Mark admonished, "there are bigger boobs than you messing up the roads everywhere."

"You shock me," remarked Topper, "but don't let's dwell on it. Now what is this thing for?"

"That's for the ventilator. It lets in the air."

"On what?"

"On your feet."

"An unpleasant inference," murmured Mr. Topper, "but I dare say the thing has its advantages. And this?" he added aloud.

"That lights your cigars."

Mr. Topper produced a cigar. Mark spoke the truth.

"A nice thing," said Mr. Topper, a little more at ease now that his lungs were refining smoke. "A handy thing, that. Very nice. Clever, too, isn't it?"

Mark, becoming more than serious, agreed that it was.

“Yes, yes,” continued Topper, sliding into the front seat of the automobile as if he were not thinking of what he was doing. “A convenient little gadget. Adds to the pleasure of driving. Now come here, Mark, and show me what you do to make the old bus go, but first take that invitation off the front of the car. Some woman might come along and buy me. Hot stuff! How about that, Mark?”

“Ha! Ha!” laughed Mark, whose false mirth was arrested by a sudden slap on the back.

“Take the damn sign off, Mark,” commanded Topper, a new light gleaming in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

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Mrs. Topper Is Not Delighted

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THE first stage of Mr. Topper's secret life dated from the Saturday on which he purchased the Kerbys' ill-fated car from Mark, the ecstatic garage owner. And this stage lasted only a week, coming to a grand anticlimax on the following Saturday. But during that time Mr. Topper, a novice in secret living, was hard pressed to maintain his customary calm either at home or abroad. The fire was no longer banked in his eyes, but seemed to be smoldering through, and occasionally he found himself scrutinizing his friends as if they were total strangers.

His introductory driving lesson was of an anatomical nature. The automobile was discussed to its most intimate parts from which only the finest mechanism could have refrained from shrinking. The lesson completed, Mr. Topper abjured Mark to silence and returned to his home, where he settled his feud with the leg of lamb through the process of absorption. In other words it became one hundred per cent Topper and for that reason acquired merit while Topper acquired flesh.

"I knew you would like it," said Mrs. Topper as though she were addressing a skeptical cannibal who had just made a

meal of a questionable victim. "I've always said you liked lamb."

Mr. Topper could not deny the truth of her words, but in spite of their truth they made him wish that he could uneat the lamb. Not knowing how to do this decently, he smiled at his wife and said, "I walked farther than I thought. Worked up an appetite."

The false smile and the black lie quelled the rebellion in his stomach. Without realizing it, Topper was already far gone in sin.

On Monday morning, after exchanging pennies with a small Italian child for a stillborn edition of a New York paper, he greeted his friends with his habitual placidity. No, he had not heard the new one about Bill's furnace. He was sorry that Mrs. Thompson was having servant trouble. Too bad. Was that so? Jennings had made a killing again. Great stuff. Surely, he'd bring the Missus over first thing. Wednesday evening? Good! Good! His tulips? Doing splendidly! A whole bed of them—all blooming. No, not brewing, just smousing about. Is that so! How about your own cellar? None of that stuff, Jack! The whole town knows about you. The farmer's daughter and the tramp? Sure he'd like to hear it. Wait till they got aboard.

And off went Topper with his boon companions, all of whom he decided were perfect strangers to him.

At the office Topper treated the president with a commendable show of tolerance. Cosmo Topper really and sincerely pitied the man, pitied him from his heart. He was a good old thing, but out of touch, pathetically inadequate. However, his chauffeur looked like a keen enough young

chap. Funny foreign-looking mustache, but then a good driver was like any other real artist. Better in fact. They had to have a little leeway. Topper would have a word with him one day. Exchange views on cars. Democratic. That was it. A man in his position could afford to be democratic. It went. As for the president, it was too bad. Topper felt sorry for him.

Now the strange thing about it was that on this particular morning the president, sighting his world-weary eyes between the bronze ears of his Great Dane desk ornament, felt pleased to permit Topper to occupy his gaze.

"A solid man," thought the president. "A good man and a worker. I can count on him. The others"—and the president's eyes never flickered—"brilliant, but they're waiting to cut my throat. To them this bank isn't home, it's something they want to control through votes and money and chicanery. Now Topper's different. He's a man, at least. Loyal to a fault."

And the president, rousing his great body, towered like a devastating sun over the gleaming surface of his desk, then slowly advanced on Topper.

"You're looking fit, Topper," he said. "This man from Texas has been in again. Don't want to see him.... Come upstairs. We'll talk it over."

Topper followed.

"Why this?" he thought. "Why have I been selected?"

Topper little realized that there was a new light in his eyes that set him apart from his fellow men. It was young and fresh. The president was an old man, and, like Topper,

he had grown weary from watching eyes. He had peered into them for more than half a century ... too deeply.

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Topper is speeding through the shadows like a virgin to a forbidden tryst. He is thrilled with secret alarm. In the close embrace of the night there is something almost personal. It clings to Topper like a wronged woman, filling him with a desire to be elsewhere.

For nearly a week now Topper had been lying steadily, mostly to his wife. Once he had stooped so low as to lie to the garbage man. Topper had come to that. It was excusable in this case, for the man collected garbage of the better sort throughout the town, and in order to forget his occupation, he continually busied his tongue with other people's affairs.

The seal of sin is settling on Topper's brow. He looks healthier and less uninteresting. He suspects everyone and, without being aware of it, he has been having a tremendous change.

At the garage, Mark is waiting for him. Good old Mark. Topper loves the man.

Topper arrives. There is a hurried conversation. Then each through his appointed door slides into the seat and they are off like a pair of conscience-stricken grave robbers. Mark is driving and Topper is doing strange, futile things with the brim of his felt hat. Instead of concealing his face, he succeeds in making himself look like a foppish desperado. He is hoping that he appears both sinister and repulsive so that people will avert their gaze without recognizing him, whereas, in truth, had any of Topper's

friends seen him at this moment, they would have been astonished beyond measure, their cherished belief in the eternal sameness of things completely demolished.

The car proceeds down a side street to that section of the town near which no nice people care to build. In this belittered and uncorseted neighborhood Topper feels more at ease. This place which he once considered a reproach to the community, when he considered it at all, has become pleasantly familiar to him, a part of his secret life. It is the hidden door that leads to the open road. The dour houses and dim shops no longer make him uneasy. He regards them with a friendly eye which does not drop disapprovingly at the sight of a woman nursing her child on the least populous step of a front stoop. And when a mulatto maid swings down the street and stops to talk with the technically white youth in the livery stable, the moral responsibility of the race question does not weigh down Topper's heart. "Whose business is it?" he thinks to himself. "People should mind their own affairs." Anyway, she was an upstanding figure of a woman.

Soon the town is left behind and the car spins along an unfrequented road.

"What did you tell her to-night, Mr. Topper?" asks Mark.

"Meeting of the Town Guardians," replies Topper, emerging from his hat.

"Last night it was a Fire Council," continues Mark. "What's it going to be to-morrow?"

"The Assessment Club," snaps Topper promptly.

Mark gives a low whistle of admiration and the conversation languishes.

"They were killed down the road a piece," Mark announces presently. "Want to see the tree? It's on the other end of the old bridge."

"Certainly not," says Topper. "To gaze upon the departing point of my predecessors would hardly add to my skill. I want to shift the gears, not chatter through them."

"All right," replies Mark, bringing the car to a stop. "You take the wheel and turn her around. Drive down the line a bit and then come back. Keep turning, and if anything comes along pull in close to the side and stop. I'll keep an eye out."

Like a dog beneath the caress of an unfamiliar hand the gears shivered nervously at Mr. Topper's touch. They did not exactly chatter, but from time to time uttered cries of protest, like a child aroused from sleep by a convulsive pain in its stomach. Mr. Topper drove wisely but not well. He obeyed all the dictates of common sense, but still there was something lacking. Through no discernible fault of his own he seemed to bring out all the wayward traits of the car. It stopped without reason and started without grace. It darted as if pursued, then loitered alluringly. It displayed all the varied moods of a temperamental woman, one moment purring soothingly, the next scolding petulantly, now running ahead blind to caution, now holding back in virtuous alarm. It strayed from the path and returned again, and it treated its ardent possessor with the arrogant indifference of a beautiful thing. Mr. Topper was charmed. Not so Mark. Nevertheless after three-quarters of an hour of conscientious objecting the car was turned over to Mark,